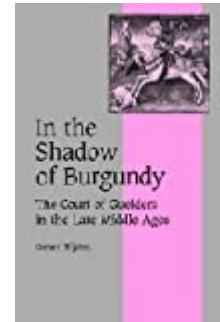




Gerard Nijsten. *In the Shadow of Burgundy: The Court of Guelders in the Late Middle Ages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xxii + 470 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82075-2.



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Hardly the Valois Dukes

The mighty Netherlandish “theatre-state” of the Valois dukes of Burgundy does indeed appear, as his title suggests, to overshadow the Lower Rhenish duchy which is the subject of Gerard Nijsten’s thoroughly researched book; but its presence is not in fact always quite as clearly or directly discernible as might be supposed. Nijsten’s intention, to reconstruct in its varied contexts and manifestations the court culture of the late medieval duchy of Guelders (1377-1473), seems naturally to point towards a study focused on cultural ties to the duchy’s wealthy, magnificent and trend-setting neighbor in the west. It is, after all, to the urban and commercial orbit of the “Burgundian Netherlands” that late medieval Guelders seems most obviously to gravitate. The figures tell their own tale. Over forty percent of the duchy’s late medieval inhabitants lived in towns, a higher proportion even than in Flanders or Brabant. The ducal patrimony lay squarely across the trade and communications arteries of the maritime north-west-down which, in 1404, magnificent tombs would be brought from Bruges for Duke William of Guelders and his consort. Yet a closer look suggests a more complex picture, of a riparian lordship uneasily positioned between contrasting spheres of

cultural, social, and political life, within a region which it makes sense to view as one of transition as well as transit. True, the landscape was broadly speaking an urbanized one; but the towns were characteristically small—with, in the duchy of Guelders, just one center (Nijmegen) boasting more than 10,000 inhabitants. Arnhem, which in the fifteenth century provided a home for the ducal court, was (despite its Hansa membership) modest by any standards, its population barely topping 3,000: a distinctly cramped venue, then, for any princely “theatre-state.” The curious practice followed in this volume, of rendering place-names in both German and Anglicized forms—(the towns of) Geldern, Jülich, and Kleve; (the principalities of) Guelders, Juliers, and Cleves—is perhaps fitting, in that it too points the reader in two directions at once: towards the polyglot milieu of international aristocratic high culture in which the dukes moved, and to the more confined world of German territorial rulership, in which the hard facts of location, size and material resources kept them grounded.

If Guelders was but a minor satellite of the Netherlandish cultural orbit, it was also a dominant presence

within the rather different constellations of the Lower Rhine and Middle Meuse regions. The ducal court, in the fifteenth century around half the size of that of the Burgundian Philip the Good (1419-1467), was roughly comparable with those of Holland, Cleves, and Brabant, and somewhat larger than Juliers-Berg. In many ways, the image of a cultural transit zone between the Germanophone east and a more developed west suits Guelders well. The court's familiarity with French enabled it to act, like other princely courts in the region, as a conduit for western literary currents. Guelders was the first Lower Rhenish court to gain (during the first half of the fifteenth century) a choir—though Flanders, Holland and Brabant all had one earlier. The fifteenth century also saw the foundation of a modest chivalric order headed by the duke, another western import. Guelders boasted for much of the later Middle Ages, by German standards, remarkably advanced institutions of government and administration—the legacy of a period of Flemish domination. Yet the picture is not only one of easy transitions, but also of contrasts and sharp disjunctions. The point is illuminated by a study of princely book-collecting. It is no surprise to find that the court of Guelders had nothing to set beside Philip the Good's renowned library of around nine hundred volumes. Indeed, it is not even certain that the dukes maintained a fixed and permanent collection of books meriting the name of library. More interesting is to survey the content of the handful of manuscripts known to have been owned by members of the ducal family. As Nijsten shows (pp. 247-253), the list of titles—of works of religious instruction and law, encyclopedias, and compendia of know-how useful to a great lord—is best viewed alongside the collections of (again, typically a few dozen) similarly conventional texts amassed by nobles elsewhere in the German lands. Of the ambitious vernacular histories and romances characteristically favored by the Burgundian court there is, by contrast, little trace.

Such observations are to be made with due caution, however, since the perspective from which Nijsten views the court of Guelders is not a conventional one. As a result, his approach tends to illuminate—but also perhaps to overshadow—specific elements of court culture in unpredictable and unfamiliar ways, and thus to frustrate easy comparisons or contrasts with other princely households. Complexity is the keynote, as is right and proper. Nevertheless, his route of access to the dukes, their patronage, and its material manifestations does merit some reflection. For this is a study of artifacts, tastes and mentalities principally assembled out of the closely-written

parchments of the ducal financial administration. This viewpoint Nijsten has adopted because he can: runs of accounts from the ducal household, as well as the municipalities of the region, survive in remarkable number, and he has quarried them, along with other administrative records, industriously and with a keen eye. But he has also taken this approach because he must. Among surviving artifacts linked with the court of Guelders are objects—the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (c.1440), for example, or an exquisite silverpoint drawing of a company of ducal courtiers (c.1415), now in Uppsala—which can rank with the most sumptuous and distinguished achievements of northern gothic art. Yet, taken together, they would represent but a meager and fragmentary haul, scarcely the basis for a reconstruction of princely outlooks, aspirations, models or doctrines of rule, still less for a rounded cultural history of the late medieval ducal court. The crucial question must therefore be whether Nijsten's alternative route, through the archives, has enabled him to fill these gaps, and convincingly to assess the character, objectives and consequences of ducal patronage.

It is at any rate beyond doubt that his sources shine a revealing light into the court and its culture, affording numerous insights, of both a general and a more detailed kind. In particular, they encourage the reader to survey afresh the range and relative status of the various “court arts,” from the viewpoint of ducal priorities. To learn, for example (p. 43), that on his visit to England in 1396 Duke William's cooks had engaged in a cooking competition with those of the English royal court is to perceive the sense behind the master cook's ranking among the “gentlemen” of the court (a group second in standing only to the “lords and knights”). Musicians, by contrast, were consigned to the middle-ranking servants, above stable hands or kitchen maids, but beneath master huntsman, barber or surgeon, not to mention the master cook (p. 157). The ducal accounts also underline just how unmistakably such status hierarchies were articulated—as in the grant of red “gentlemen's clothing” recorded against the name of Claes Heynenzoon, the celebrated “Gelre Herald” (lesser servants wore blue). Suspicions that the various categories of “artist” were valued at court on a different scale from those which the modern reader might apply are confirmed by the pattern, which Nijsten reconstructs, of ducal expenditure. This information also puts court culture as a whole firmly in its place. In the year 1404/5, for example, just 1.9 percent of recorded payments were for (broadly) cultural services and artifacts (p. 105). Such a figure is probably not untypical for a

princely court of the time. More striking, perhaps, is that all but 0.3 percent of that went on goldsmiths' work. A new outfit made for Duke William in 1397, for his visit to the Shrovetide festivities at Sinzig on the Rhine, cost 328 florins: enough to pay a ducal watchman's wages for sixty-six years. Recorded expenditure on painting and sculpture throughout the whole of 1404/5 came, by contrast, to just thirty-five florins, or a negligible 0.05 percent of the budget.

Indeed, it is rather odd that Nijsten, whose book aims to reconstruct ducal values and outlooks, did not pay more explicit regard to such inescapable messages from his sources. Already the title of his chapter on non-literary artifacts—"Visual and Applied Arts"—seems to suggest a distinction of which the dukes themselves, on the evidence of their expenditure, were quite unaware, and implicit relative valuations which they would certainly not have shared. Similarly modern priorities appear to underlie the chapter's organization, with painting (on panels and glass) and sculpture given precedence over tapestries, jewelry and metalwork. Yet we know of very little panel painting which can be linked with the court of Guelders. Nijsten's tendency (p. 260) to explain this lacuna in terms of subsequent losses is only partially convincing. True, financial accounts and inventories do record the existence of further, obscure works. But more important is the fact that, in northern Europe in the late Middle Ages, panel painting (which used relatively cheap, "ignoble" materials) was scarcely a princely genre, but one which flourished above all in large towns, where communities of craftsmen supplied a market of rich burghers, clerics and officials—such as was to be found, for example, in late medieval Cologne, whence around 350 such works still survive.[1] At a princely court, a painter was far more likely to be employed painting armorials or decorating banners and pennons—work repeatedly noted in the records from Guelders. Nijsten's trawl of the sources for commissions to sculptors likewise largely draws a blank. His accounts are rich, by contrast, in entries relating to the purchase of wall-hangings and tapestries—though these earn just two and a half pages, to the twelve which Nijsten devotes to painting. The implications of this evident pattern of ducal interest and expenditure might have been pondered and emphasized more.

While the effect of such an emphasis might have been to make the cultural life of the court of Guelders seem yet more commonplace and derivative than it does, that impression would at least appear to be in accord with Nijsten's sources. The financial records reveal much about

the locations where specific objects were made; and it is thought-provoking to observe just how often these lay outside the duchy: Flanders, and even England, for tapestries, Utrecht for luxury manuscripts, Cologne and Brabant for goldsmiths' work, Brussels for a carriage for Duchess Catherine—not to mention funerary monuments from Bruges. While Nijsten does also have much to say about the court's dealings with craftsmen closer to home, the contrast with the heavy reliance which the Burgundian dukes were in the fifteenth century able to place upon the artistic and commercial powerhouses of their own northern domains remains striking. It is also useful to note some of the genres of court culture unrepresented in late medieval Guelders—above all, perhaps, historical writings linked to the court, which elsewhere in Germany (not to speak of the Burgundian Netherlands) arose in this period to provide a charter for the consolidation of princely rule.[2] But if the reader is left with the impression of, on the whole, a somewhat unremarkable princely household, that may be at least in part a consequence of the inherently leveling effect of the author's chosen source base, which is much better suited to highlighting the generic, the recurrent, and the commonplace than to illuminating the exceptional, or disclosing the impact of ducal patronage upon those who were exposed to it. The accounts of the ducal receiver-general can spread out before the reader's eyes the glittering paraphernalia of princely high living: Duke Arnold's decorated board games and salt cellars in precious metals, John of Egmond's gold mirror painted with saints or his gold or gilt figure of St John the Evangelist; but they are far less able to illuminate the men and women who heaped up this treasure trove as fully formed human beings, with distinctive tastes and attitudes.

Yet such hints and clues as the records have preserved suggest that the rulers of late medieval Guelders were in fact rather more interesting individuals than might at first seem. Perhaps the most remarkable of them all was Arnold of Egmond, a devotee of Seneca, in the habit of conducting ducal business from his personal cell at the Carthusian monastery of Monnikhuizen, who is reputed, albeit in a later tradition, while in Rome on pilgrimage to have made his confession to the pope in Latin (p. 141). That government documents will never take us far towards comprehending Duke Arnold's complex personality is readily to be accepted. Their limitations become more troublesome, however, when Nijsten seeks, as he does in his closing chapter, to make them a foundation for general conclusions about popular attitudes towards the ducal regime—and about the emergence of what he

terms “national” or “territorial” sentiment in Guelders. Embedded within the archives are, it is true, some remarkable individual insights, attesting to the closeness of the ducal family’s relations with groups among its subjects (their startling closeness, indeed, when in 1430 representatives of the towns were invited to Kleve to witness the consummation of Arnold’s marriage, “where [as a municipal record puts it] my lord slept with his lady” [p. 368]). By and large, however, it is easy, in view of the character of his sources, to understand why in this—the weakest—part of his book Nijsten is apt to fall back on speculation and assertion, in attempting to trace the emergence of a common political identity, focused on the ducal dynasty.

This is a fine, learned, and valuable study, broad in its perspectives, and deep and varied in its insights. It is also elegantly produced, with a generous selection of (mostly helpful and relevant) illustrations, while the original Dutch text has been ably translated into English. The records are made to yield up an impressive range of information; and, if they remain stubbornly silent on many important matters, and hold up a distorting lens to others, the fresh perspectives which Nijsten wins from them are nevertheless substantial and often salutary. Perhaps most valuable of all is the way in which his approach anchors high-aristocratic display squarely in the hard facts

of wealth and its management. Access to advanced cultural forms, and even the ruler’s own self-image and aspirations, were not on their own enough: size, location, resources, and the manner of their husbanding, all likewise had a share in determining just how substantial a shadow a princely court would ultimately prove able to cast.

Notes

[1]. Frank Günther Zehnder, *Gotische Malerei in Köln: Alt kölnische Bilder von 1300 bis 1550* (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1993), p. 16. For the social composition of the market for paintings in a major Netherlandish center, see Jean C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1998).

[2]. For Germany, see Hans Patze, “Königliche Landesgeschichte im späten Mittelalter”, in *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewusstsein im späten Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Patze (Vorträge und Forschungen 31, Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1987), pp. 331-370; for Burgundy, Graeme Small, *George Chastelain and the Shaping of Valois Burgundy: Political and Historical Culture at Court in the Fifteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997).

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